

A Bird's-Eye View of

Ecocritical Reading of the Selected Writings of

Dhruv Bhatt and Gopinath Mohanty:

A Thesis

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A Bird's-Eye-View

Current environmental scenario could be seen as a bird's-eye-view of what kind of biospherical horrors might take over the planet earth in very near future. Eminent ecologists have often declared that if the existing modes of human behavior with nature are not ameliorated radically and immediately, the ecological future of the earth is potentially bleak for all organisms. Since my research also underscores that declaration, this 'Bird's-Eye View' might prove the old proverb literally as well as metaphorically true- which says that the 'coming events cast their shadows before'.

Considering the devastating role the anthropogenic activities have played in destabilizing the interdependent ecological networks, it is not difficult to pinpoint as to what has been accelerating our march towards ecocide. In fact, it is the combination of the greed-based commodification of nature and the resulting unbridled exploitation of the earth and her collective resources which widen the nature/culture splits, dehumanize humans and thus continue to petrify human apathy for the natural environs.

So, to mitigate the ensuing ecological enormities, as polities across the world have often acknowledged on the global platforms, it is a precondition to ecosensitize the prevailing human conceptions about the natural environs of the earth. UN policies and accords pertaining to sustainable growth and biodiversity preservation programs point towards the immediacy to re-examine human narratives of progress and towards the inevitability to inform all human activities with environmental awareness.

In this regard, this thesis attempts to explicate how ecocriticism can provide a useful way out. While reading literary expressions, ecocritics ask basic questions like: How nature is represented in the given text? What are the factors (socio-cultural-

economic-historical-philosophic-scientific-religious-psychological etc.) which have gone into the constructions of those representations? How characters deal with their physical environs? How the given text could be useful in generating environmental sensitivity in the readers' psyche? etc.

Ecocriticism thus provides a platform to evaluate fictional depictions of man-nature relationships in their factual contexts. It attempts to respond to the environmental urgencies by appreciating nature-sensitive and earth-oriented aspects of literary expressions. It also examines how subjugation of humans on account of their gender or economic positions complicate the issue of restoring ecological equilibrium.

This research is an attempt to decode the authorial arguments that promote ideas to prioritize environmental well-being of the biodiversity, and that of the poor but ecologically conscious and self-reliant people living in small hamlets, cohabiting in the river valleys, amid the forests, on the river banks and on the coastal areas- whose simple modes of life and traditional eco-wisdom they have inherited from the Indian cultural consciousness still retain a huge potential to guide the whole world towards building an environmentally sustainable future.

It is pertinent to note here that although reflections of human love for nature and for the planet earth could be traced in the most ancient forms of art, the serious thought to preserve the earth and her environment began to surface in the environmental debates predominantly in 1970s, when the idea to revitalize human connections with the earth came from the 'skies above'.

The photograph of the planet earth called "Earthrise" taken during the Apollo Eight Mission from the space on the Christmas eve of 1968 by the American astronaut William Anders stimulated debates across different disciplines of knowledge about

protecting the earth and her life-sustaining biosphere. In the subsequent space missions, various astronauts have also described the earth at different times as the most beautiful, marble-like, pale blue oasis throbbing with life.

Robin Mckie notes that “Earth Rise” “revealed the fragility and isolation” of our “glittering blue hemisphere”- the only home we know of. Looking at the mesmerizing photograph of the earth, the US astronomer Carl Sagan had rightly remarked : ““There is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves”” Mckie observes that “Earth Rise” has remained one of the most influential images in the world, since it exhibits “the story of how a picture transformed our view of ourselves” (“The Mission that Changed Everything”).

The chapters that follow will also exhibit how critical assessment of the word-pictures of nature that emerge from ‘below’- i.e. from the earth- could also take us on a flight of imagination to help us transform “our view of ourselves” by correcting our anthropocentric conceptions of nature.

Vijay Dasmana, an environmental activist of India, as if explicating ecocritics’ method of examining a text’s language, explains how nomenclatures define our approach towards nature, and how ecological destruction could be facilitated by defining nature in bureaucratic, anthropocentric and commercial terms. For example, he says, the word ‘forestry’, according to its stock definition, refers to the management of forest for commercial activities. So, what is not commercially profitable is a ‘waste land’ and not a forest. The protagonist of Bhatt’s *Oceanside Blues* is a civil engineer who has been authorized to declare an ecologically and culturally alive coastal zone as ‘waste land’ so that it could be declared as industrial zone.

When poetic descriptions of scientific minds can encourage masses to invigorate their campaigns to protect this paradise-like planet; the ecocritical platform attempts to strengthen this movement by offering scopes for the ecocritics to examine poetic descriptions of nature in light of some scientific facts and sociological figures.

It seems pertinent to clarify at this point as to why I have chosen three texts by Bhatt and only one text by Mohanty. Since Bhatt's stories are set in different locations, they represent different ecological issues and involve different kinds of characters; but Mohanty's novels which thematize socio-ecological issues are majorly set in one place- that is the forests of Orissa. Hence, I have chosen *Paraja* for the purpose of my present study, it being Mohanty's magnum opus. It has been critically acclaimed for its succinct focus on preserving the tribal cultures, rituals and their issues.

On the other hand, in Bhatt's stories, besides social customs and folklores of the local people, one comes across a verity of birds and animals and creatures, and their encounters with humans. So, the reason of choosing Bhatt's three novels for this study is that they offer the variety of locations and characters I need to understand different ecocritical strands. For example, *Oceanside Blues*, as its title indicates, draws attention to marine biodiversity and coastal cultures. The story of his *That Thou Art* takes place in the lap of the Narmada and among the tribals of the river valley; whereas, *Akoopar* is set in the Gir forest where lions and the 'maldharies' (cattle-breeders) predominate the action.

The introductory chapter of this thesis, while taking a brief etymological survey of the term 'ecocriticism,' and referring to its major branches, and their fundamental

features, primarily focuses on the human need to be ecocritical in contexts of the present ecopolitics and its undesirable impacts on natural ecology.

The second chapter brings a recent poem into play to have a panoramic view of the evolutionary journey of humans in order to outline the broad modifications human conceptions of nature have undergone along with the changing times. It charts these phenomena by indicating the evolutionary shifts that have taken place in human occupations (from hunting to agriculture to industrial sectors) as well as their theocratic and political schemas to show how these changes have incrementally intensified commodification of nature, and widened the physical, psychological and emotional rifts between man and nature.

This chapter argues that keeping in view the dazzling knowledge humans have acquired about laws of nature so far, and the progress the mankind has procured on the techno-scientific, industrial, economic and digital fronts, it is not at all out of place to expect that the homo sapiens, who consider themselves as ‘the most intelligent creatures on the earth’, should have by now significantly minimized the ecological victimization of the non-human species and of the less-privileged human communities. However, paradoxically as the facts and figures mentioned in the thesis as well as our general experience of life would suggest, the actual scenario is dramatically different.

By explaining themes of the select stories in light of three major branches of ecocriticism- namely- ecofeminism, ecosocialism and deep ecology- in the first two chapter, the remaining three chapters attempt to figure out the root causes from where the complex of environmental issues stem.

While exploring Bhatt’s fictional world from ecofeminist perspectives, the third chapter accommodates a variety of critical voices which argue that it is the patriarchy

which is responsible for the environmental degradation that we see around today. Male-centrism have inferiorized the earth and the womenfolk by constructing their images in the cultural psyche as passive, emotionally wild, physically fragile against the images of man supposedly possessing superior qualities which make them proactive, creative, physically powerful, and intelligent creatures. Thus, by feminizing nature and naturalizing women, the self-centred tendencies of males have justified colonization and exploitation of the earth, and the mind and body of the womenfolk. So, ecofeminists argue that not only economic equality but replacement of the aggressive male-centric power systems with caring and all-embracing female-centric political systems could be the best alternative for the humans who seem to be trying to recover the ecobalance of the earth.

Agreeing with the ecofeminists' demands to establish economic equity across all sections of the society, as the study of Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* in chapter four would imply, ecosocialists fervently demand a radical transformation in the existing, capitalist economic systems. By fictionalizing a local story, *Paraja* throws light on the global story of the economic, ecological, psychological, physical, cultural, and spiritual ruin of the poor people for which the greed for money and greed of power of a select few are responsible. In Marxist vein, ecosocialists blame capitalism for irreversibly damaging socio-environmental balance since its profit-intensive operations would always tend to create and strengthen such policies through which only a select few would be benefited by exploiting natural as well as the economically marginalized human world.

Mohanty's *Paraja* poetically unfolds the horrifying tragedies that befall on the free, hard-working and economically helpless forest tribes after they are expelled from their own farm lands. On the other hand, in chapter five, the deep-ecological study of

Bhatt's *Oceanside Blues* again draws attention to the fact as to how haphazard industrialisation can pollute the soil, water resources, marine life and cultural ecologies of specific geo-cultural landscapes.

Although Bhatt's novel *Sarmeya Walks the Pathless Path* is not studied in this thesis, it needs a mention here because, as one would find in his *Oceanside Blues*, it also deconstructs the concept of Master/Slave relationships between Man/Nature. Following the literary style used in the fables of *Panchtantra*, Bhatt's dog-protagonist called 'Sarmaya' challenges those human tendencies that make them take the natural freedom of animals as well as the liberty of other humans for granted in order to pursue their self-determined socio-religious, political and economic objectives.

Deep ecologists, as explained in the fifth chapter, demand to add ethical dimension to the environmental problematic. They believe that the environmental discourse which does not take into account perspectives of the non-human world cannot resolve ecological issues. They suggest that the stimulant behind the environmental activities carried out by humans should be their moral awareness that the non-human entities, like the human animals, possess an intrinsic right to protect their survival by utilizing the collective natural resources; and the humans, who have no right to pollute their natural habitats, therefore need to adopt sustainable modes of life.

While explaining how hyper consumerism and the reckless waste have damaged the interlinked ecosystems, Steven Hartman, and Serpil Oppermann rightly observes that Covid-19 has compelled us to think seriously about altering our unrestrained consumption habits and unsustainable modes of life. It has indeed reminded us how intricately are all humans, the non-humans and the biosphere connected, and how important it is to "adopt social and multispecies justice frameworks and promote a

global biopolitics based on the preciousness of all life” (“Seeds of Transformative Change” 4).

Environmental ethics and humanitarian principles remind us the importance of not ignoring the shortcomings of the Eastern and the Western ways of defining nature and the ‘other’, while taking advantage by synthesizing the strengths of both.

The all-inclusive and non-violent environmental ethics promoted by the deep ecologists draw our attention to the significant contribution the egalitarian cosmic vision embedded in the Indian spiritual texts, and the rich insights the tribal cultures of India can offer into the ongoing global environmental discourse.

Misinterpretations of the Biblical story suggests that the fall of humans from the heaven to the earth was a form of punishment against the human transgression of the God’s command, and it was the non-human entity (the snake symbolizing Satan) which had enticed Eve to seduce Adam. So, the anthropomorphic/male image of God holds the non-human world as well as the womenfolk responsible for precipitating the human fall; whereas the ancient spiritual texts of India which instruct humans to treat man, women and the non-humans on equal terms from spiritual view point do not consider the non-human entities responsible for any sort of misfortunes that might plague the humans.

For Karl Marx, religion is the opium for the people as its illusory effect tends to make the masses forget their immediate woes and prevent them from ushering into a revolution to change their material conditions and the class structures. But, as it has been discussed in chapter-IV, in Gandhian view, religion can work as a panacea which can energize humans to transform the world. The exemplary legal fight the Bishnois have fought to procure justice for the black bucks killed in the Rajasthan

back in 1998 aptly supports the later argument. Bishnois are ready to lay down their lives even today to protect the eco-protective doctrines given by their ‘Guru’ Jambheshwarji before four centuries. “Bishnois revere animal and plant life; in their world view,” says Namrata Joshi, “killing an animal or felling a tree is a sacrilege, punishable only by death” (“20 Years Later, This is Why Salman Khan is Still Hated by the Bishnois of Jodhpur”).

Thus, besides Upanishads and epics, India has so many local religious figures, folklore, social customs and indigenous languages which encourage her people to protect not only animals and birds, but also her revered hills and holy rivers and sacred oceans. In fact, there are so many environmental laws in India which are capable of protecting her biodiversity.

However, the official figures of deforestation, extinction rates of certain biodiversity, rise in the pollution indices and the quick disappearance of indigenous cultures and their linguistic varieties in India suggest, critical juxtaposition of Indian texts with their ecological contexts is indeed necessary. This exercise is likely to offer important environmental insights for the industrially developing economy like India.

While studying *That Thou Art*, it is necessary for us to be reminded of the well-known fact that the projects to purify our holiest river Ganges, which has been in operation since 1987, have not been yet able to clean our National river though 6000 crores have already been spent after the same.

It is indeed a formidable task for the developing economies to rescue the aquatic health of their water bodies from the untreated sewage, from the illegal discharge of the toxic waste, from the agricultural run-offs that come along with poisonous pesticides, and from the unregulated discharge of the plastic and electronic waste. In

fact, the temporary lock-down imposed during the recent pandemic which saved the waters of Ganges and her biodiversity from industrial toxins seems to echo what Bhatt and Mohanty have to say in their works.

In light of the thematic assessment of the select texts and their characters' physical, economic and emotional associations with their locales (ocean, river, forest, mountains), it would surely become interesting on the following pages to understand as to how and why crucial it is to de-accelerate the mounting speed and volumes of the anthropogenic pressures being exerted on the earth's ecosystems, her green covers and her blue blood.

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